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An Open Letter to SchwuZ

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As queer artists, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people invested in the fight against oppression worldwide, we were appalled and shocked by the following events that took place at SchwuZ on Friday, October 13th, 2023, during the "Drag Open Stage Finale":

1. A staffer from SchwuZ asked a guest – coincidentally a German-Palestinian with family in Gaza – to turn his t-shirt, which read "Anti-Apartheid Club", inside out so that the print would not be visible. The explanation given by SchwuZ staff was that another guest "felt offended by it." It is not clear what exactly this person was offended by, and why the SchwuZ staff saw this request as enough to infringe on another person's clothing.
2. One of the performers showed a banner that read "Free Palestine / It is not a conflict, it is settler colonialism against which resistance is justified" at the end of their performance. Afterward, the booking managers came backstage and asked the performer to not show the banner again on stage. When asked why, they said that the Drag Open Stage Finale is not about a political agenda and that it is not possible to show the complexity of the situation in a banner. After the performance, one of the presenters of the event made an announcement on stage that any statement made on stage does not represent SchwuZ's values.

Why are being anti-apartheid and supporting the freedom of Palestine controversial? To whom exactly? Who is offended by these "complex" political statements? Why did SchwuZ try to silence and intimidate its performers and its audience when the violence we are witnessing in Palestine is brought up and challenged?

"Whether it's a party or artistic expression, we're a space for queer culture and social and political engagement."

"We live queer pop culture and provide a stage for all types of artistic expression."

"SchwuZ remains lively, sassy, combative and political!"

These claims, taken from SchwuZ's website (<https://www.schwuz.de/en/schwuz/club/>, <https://www.schwuz.de/en/schwuz/association/>), are in direct contradiction with the

booking managers' appeals to keep the "political agenda" out of their event on October 13th, as well as telling the guest to turn his "Anti-Apartheid Club" shirt inside-out. Additionally, other political statements made during the Open Stage were not met with requests to stay apolitical. This is a clear attempt to silence and intimidate Palestinian support, in line with the other attempts that we are seeing all across Germany. We are witnessing the institutionalised censorship of any display of solidarity with a people facing 75 years of forced displacement, human rights abuses, and denial of their right to freedom and self-determination.

Art is a space to debate, to take a stand, to speak on complex social and political issues. The idea that any question is "too complex" to speak about on stage is nonsense. Queer liberation and liberation from any form of oppression must go hand in hand. Drag is an inherently political art form, challenging systems of patriarchy, sexism, heteronormativity, and every intersection of systemic oppression. Just as anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist expressions are part of drag, the solidarity with Palestinian liberation has its representation in this art form.

Any attempt at censoring this is disingenuous at best and at worst plays into the dangerous and racist silencing of Palestinian voices and those in solidarity with them. Israel has long since employed pinkwashing as a tactic to justify its many human rights abuses. As queer people, we refuse to be instrumentalized.

We cannot maintain neutrality in the face of such clearly spelled out, proudly announced, and worldwide broadcasted war crimes committed by Israel. Cutting water, food, electricity, fuel, and humanitarian aid to the 2.2 million inhabitants of Gaza, with no discrimination between fighters and unarmed civilians, is a clear attempt at genocide. Besides, the 16-year-long illegal blockade of Gaza, the 55-year-long illegal occupation of the West Bank, the apartheid system in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory have all been tactics with which the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians has been carried out for more than 75 years.

We cannot maintain neutrality, especially at a time when many institutions are withdrawing spaces and platforms to make Palestinian voices heard. Furthermore, Berlin has seen in the last two weeks an extreme spike in the repression and criminalization of international solidarity with Palestinians. From demonstration bans to police brutality and arbitrary arrests, we have witnessed countless attempts to intimidate and harass protesters.

We cry for the loss of Israeli lives, and we cry for the countless more Palestinian ones that were taken and destroyed since the colonization of Palestine. But in all this pain, can we take a moment to ask ourselves: Why is this happening? How do we stop this? How do we move forward? And if the answer is not the liberation of Palestine and Palestinians living under the colonial occupation then we are missing the point: Palestinians will not be safe as long as the occupation is in place; Israelis will not be safe as long as the occupation is in place. No one will not be free until everyone is free. And that's why we stand for a free Palestine.

In this open letter we plead to the fact that Palestinians have been systematically oppressed and murdered for more than 75 years, and we want to bring awareness to the fact that acts of solidarity against this violence are being silenced and censored at SchwuZ.

The events of October 13th show that SchwuZ is not a space for free artistic expression and that SchwutZ is not a space where we – as drag performers and guests – can express anti-colonial and anti-racist stances. This is something that we see as extremely concerning, as we proudly embrace drag as an inherently political expression. Which is why have the following demands:

- We demand that SchwuZ lives up to the values it declares to embody by making sure these acts of censorship of Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices do not happen again.
- We demand that SchwuZ issues a public apology and a condemnation of the acts of intimidation towards performers and members of the audience when they express solidarity and support for Palestine and against apartheid.

We the undersigned, refuse to perform in or visit SchwuZ until accountability has been taken. We call on our queer siblings and everybody else to take part in this boycott and stand up for our shared values of freedom and dignity, as well as against the repression of artistic freedom.